

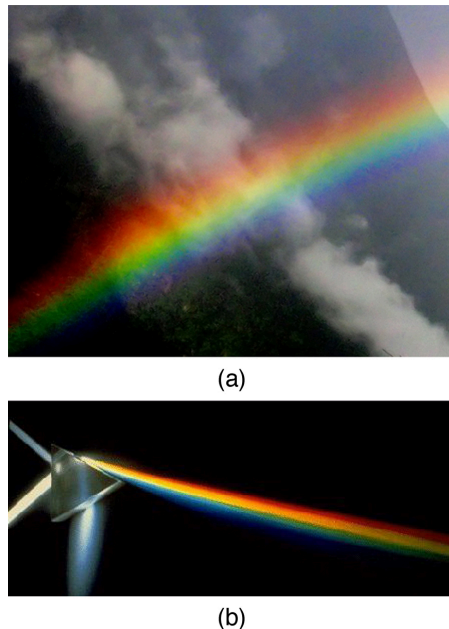
## 25.5 Dispersion: The Rainbow and Prisms

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Explain the phenomenon of dispersion and discuss its advantages and disadvantages.

Everyone enjoys the spectacle and surprise of rainbows. They've been hailed as symbols of hope and spirituality and are the subject of stories and myths across the world's cultures. Just how does sunlight falling on water droplets cause the multicolored image we see, and what else does this phenomenon tell us about light, color, and radiation? Working in his native Persia (now Iran), Kamal al-Din Hasan ibn Ali ibn Hasan al-Farisi (1267–1319) designed a series of innovative experiments to answer this question and clarify the explanations of many earlier scientists. At that time, there were no microscopes to examine tiny drops of water similar to those in the atmosphere, so Farisi created an enormous drop of water. He filled a large glass vessel with water and placed it inside a camera obscura, in which he could carefully control the entry of light. Using a series of careful observations on the resulting multicolored spectra of light, he deduced and confirmed that the droplets split—or decompose—white light into the colors of the rainbow. Farisi's contemporary, Theodoric of Freiberg (in Germany), performed similar experiments using other equipment. Both relied on the prior work of Ibn al-Haytham, often known as the founder of optics and among the first to formalize a scientific method.

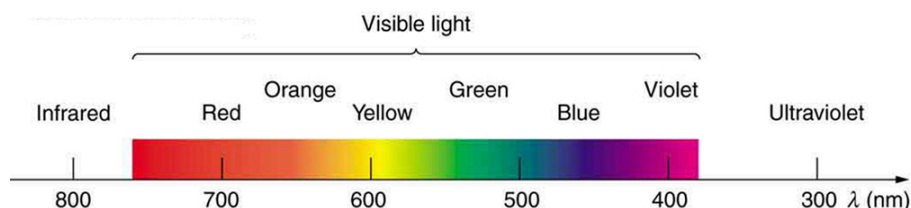


**FIGURE 25.20** The colors of the rainbow (a) and those produced by a prism (b) are identical. (credit: Alfredo55, Wikimedia Commons; NASA)

We see about six colors in a rainbow—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet; sometimes indigo is listed, too. Those colors are associated with different wavelengths of light, as shown in [Figure 25.21](#). When our eye receives pure-wavelength light, we tend to see only one of the six colors, depending on wavelength. The thousands of other hues we can sense in other situations are our eye's response to various mixtures of wavelengths. White light, in particular, is a fairly uniform mixture of all visible wavelengths. Sunlight, considered to be white, actually appears to be a bit yellow because of its mixture of wavelengths, but it does contain all visible wavelengths. The sequence of colors in rainbows is the same sequence as the colors plotted versus wavelength in [Figure 25.21](#). What this implies is that white light is spread out according to wavelength in a rainbow. **Dispersion** is defined as the spreading of white light into its full spectrum of wavelengths. More technically, dispersion occurs whenever there is a process that changes the direction of light in a manner that depends on wavelength. Dispersion, as a general phenomenon, can occur for any type of wave and always involves wavelength-dependent processes.

## Dispersion

Dispersion is defined to be the spreading of white light into its full spectrum of wavelengths.



**FIGURE 25.21** Even though rainbows are associated with seven colors, the rainbow is a continuous distribution of colors according to wavelengths.

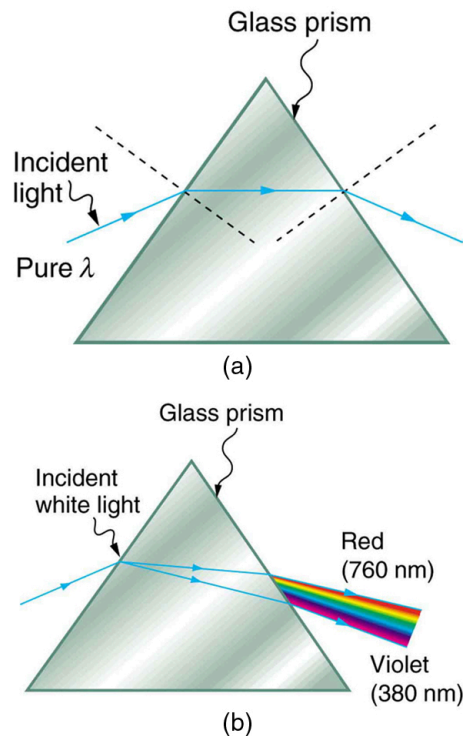
Refraction is responsible for dispersion in rainbows and many other situations. The angle of refraction depends on the index of refraction, as we saw in [The Law of Refraction](#). We know that the index of refraction  $n$  depends on the medium. But for a given medium,  $n$  also depends on wavelength. (See [Table 25.2](#). Note that, for a given medium,  $n$  increases as wavelength decreases and is greatest for violet light. Thus violet light is bent more than red light, as shown for a prism in [Figure 25.22\(b\)](#), and the light is dispersed into the same sequence of wavelengths as seen in [Figure 25.20](#) and [Figure 25.21](#).

### Making Connections: Dispersion

Any type of wave can exhibit dispersion. Sound waves, all types of electromagnetic waves, and water waves can be dispersed according to wavelength. Dispersion occurs whenever the speed of propagation depends on wavelength, thus separating and spreading out various wavelengths. Dispersion may require special circumstances and can result in spectacular displays such as in the production of a rainbow. This is also true for sound, since all frequencies ordinarily travel at the same speed. If you listen to sound through a long tube, such as a vacuum cleaner hose, you can easily hear it is dispersed by interaction with the tube. Dispersion, in fact, can reveal a great deal about what the wave has encountered that disperses its wavelengths. The dispersion of electromagnetic radiation from outer space, for example, has revealed much about what exists between the stars—the so-called empty space.

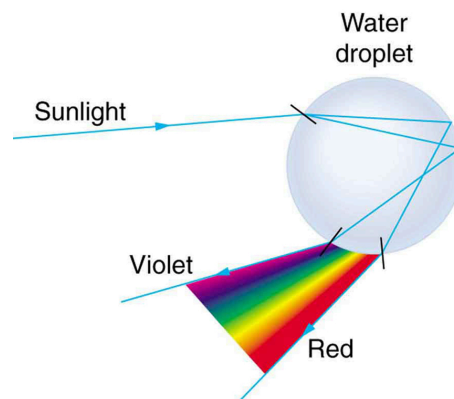
Medium	Red (660 nm)	Orange (610 nm)	Yellow (580 nm)	Green (550 nm)	Blue (470 nm)	Violet (410 nm)
Water	1.331	1.332	1.333	1.335	1.338	1.342
Diamond	2.410	2.415	2.417	2.426	2.444	2.458
Glass, crown	1.512	1.514	1.518	1.519	1.524	1.530
Glass, flint	1.662	1.665	1.667	1.674	1.684	1.698
Polystyrene	1.488	1.490	1.492	1.493	1.499	1.506
Quartz, fused	1.455	1.456	1.458	1.459	1.462	1.468

**TABLE 25.2** Index of Refraction  $n$  in Selected Media at Various Wavelengths

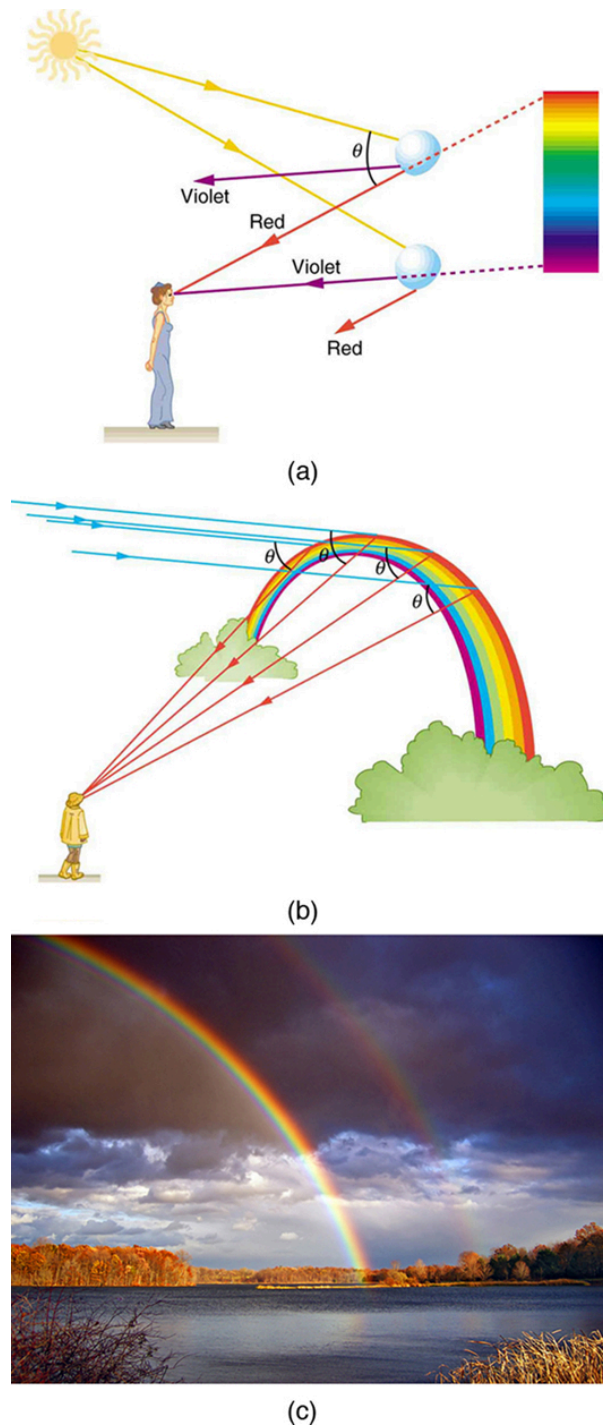


**FIGURE 25.22** (a) A pure wavelength of light falls onto a prism and is refracted at both surfaces. (b) White light is dispersed by the prism (shown exaggerated). Since the index of refraction varies with wavelength, the angles of refraction vary with wavelength. A sequence of red to violet is produced, because the index of refraction increases steadily with decreasing wavelength.

Rainbows are produced by a combination of refraction and reflection. You may have noticed that you see a rainbow only when you look away from the sun. Light enters a drop of water and is reflected from the back of the drop, as shown in [Figure 25.23](#). The light is refracted both as it enters and as it leaves the drop. Since the index of refraction of water varies with wavelength, the light is dispersed, and a rainbow is observed, as shown in [Figure 25.24](#) (a). (There is no dispersion caused by reflection at the back surface, since the law of reflection does not depend on wavelength.) The actual rainbow of colors seen by an observer depends on the myriad of rays being refracted and reflected toward the observer's eyes from numerous drops of water. The effect is most spectacular when the background is dark, as in stormy weather, but can also be observed in waterfalls and lawn sprinklers. The arc of a rainbow comes from the need to be looking at a specific angle relative to the direction of the sun, as illustrated in [Figure 25.24](#) (b). (If there are two reflections of light within the water drop, another “secondary” rainbow is produced. This rare event produces an arc that lies above the primary rainbow arc—see [Figure 25.24](#) (c).)



**FIGURE 25.23** Part of the light falling on this water drop enters and is reflected from the back of the drop. This light is refracted and dispersed both as it enters and as it leaves the drop.



**FIGURE 25.24** (a) Different colors emerge in different directions, and so you must look at different locations to see the various colors of a rainbow. (b) The arc of a rainbow results from the fact that a line between the observer and any point on the arc must make the correct angle with the parallel rays of sunlight to receive the refracted rays. (c) Double rainbow. (credit: Nicholas, Wikimedia Commons)

Dispersion may produce beautiful rainbows, but it can cause problems in optical systems. White light used to transmit messages in a fiber is dispersed, spreading out in time and eventually overlapping with other messages. Since a laser produces a nearly pure wavelength, its light experiences little dispersion, an advantage over white light for transmission of information. In contrast, dispersion of electromagnetic waves coming to us from outer space can be used to determine the amount of matter they pass through. As with many phenomena, dispersion can be useful or a nuisance, depending on the situation and our human goals.



## PHET EXPLORATIONS

### Geometric Optics

How does a lens form an image? See how light rays are refracted by a lens. Watch how the image changes when you adjust the focal length of the lens, move the object, move the lens, or move the screen.

[Click to view content \(https://openstax.org/books/college-physics-2e/pages/25-5-dispersion-the-rainbow-and-prisms\)](https://openstax.org/books/college-physics-2e/pages/25-5-dispersion-the-rainbow-and-prisms)



## 25.6 Image Formation by Lenses

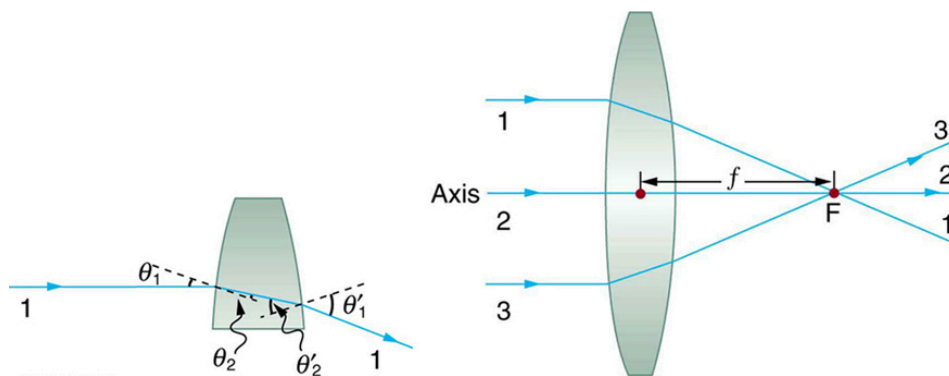
### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- List the rules for ray tracking for thin lenses.
- Illustrate the formation of images using the technique of ray tracking.
- Determine power of a lens given the focal length.

Lenses are found in a huge array of optical instruments, ranging from a simple magnifying glass to the eye to a camera's zoom lens. In this section, we will use the law of refraction to explore the properties of lenses and how they form images.

The word *lens* derives from the Latin word for a lentil bean, the shape of which is similar to the convex lens in [Figure 25.25](#). The convex lens shown has been shaped so that all light rays that enter it parallel to its axis cross one another at a single point on the opposite side of the lens. (The axis is defined to be a line normal to the lens at its center, as shown in [Figure 25.25](#).) Such a lens is called a **converging (or convex) lens** for the converging effect it has on light rays. An expanded view of the path of one ray through the lens is shown, to illustrate how the ray changes direction both as it enters and as it leaves the lens. Since the index of refraction of the lens is greater than that of air, the ray moves towards the perpendicular as it enters and away from the perpendicular as it leaves. (This is in accordance with the law of refraction.) Due to the lens's shape, light is thus bent toward the axis at both surfaces. The point at which the rays cross is defined to be the **focal point**  $F$  of the lens. The distance from the center of the lens to its focal point is defined to be the **focal length**  $f$  of the lens. [Figure 25.26](#) shows how a converging lens, such as that in a magnifying glass, can converge the nearly parallel light rays from the sun to a small spot.



**FIGURE 25.25** Rays of light entering a converging lens parallel to its axis converge at its focal point  $F$ . (Ray 2 lies on the axis of the lens.) The distance from the center of the lens to the focal point is the lens's focal length  $f$ . An expanded view of the path taken by ray 1 shows the perpendiculars and the angles of incidence and refraction at both surfaces.

### Converging or Convex Lens

The lens in which light rays that enter it parallel to its axis cross one another at a single point on the opposite side with a converging effect is called converging lens.